

UNITED NATIONS
ECONOMIC
AND
SOCIAL COUNCIL



Distr.
GENERAL

E/CN.5/1989/4
2 February 1989

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

COMMISSION FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
Thirty-first session
Vienna, 13-22 March 1989
Item 4 of the provisional agenda*

TRENDS AND STRATEGIES FOR SOCIAL INTEGRATION, POPULAR
PARTICIPATION, AND POLICIES FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF
SPECIFIC SOCIAL GROUPS

Social situation of families: results of the survey of
national policies for families

Report of the Secretary-General

SUMMARY

In order to provide information on policies and programmes concerning families, a survey of national policies for families was undertaken by the Secretary-General. Pursuant to Economic and Social Council resolution 1987/46, the present report describes the survey and provides a preliminary summary of the replies of Governments to questions concerning families and their individual members.

*E/CN.5/1989/1.

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INTRODUCTION

A. Background

1. In compliance with resolution 1987/46 of the Economic and Social Council, the present report sets out, for consideration by the Commission for Social Development at its thirty-first session, the results of the survey of national policies for families conducted by the Secretary-General and currently nearing completion. The survey is part of a wider effort in the United Nations to gather information about, analyse and report on the changing situation of families and government policies in respect to families* and responds to a growing national and international interest in the family.
2. This growing interest is reflected, inter alia, in the actions taken at recent United Nations meetings. For example, the Interregional Consultation on Developmental Social Welfare Policies and Programmes, held at Vienna, from 7 to 15 September 1987, adopted Guiding Principles for Developmental Social Welfare Policies and Programmes in the Near Future (E/CONF.80/10, sect. III, paras. 17-100), subsequently endorsed by the General Assembly in resolution 42/125, in which a number of key references to the family were included, as well as a separate section on the family. More recently, the General Assembly, in resolution 43/135, requested the Secretary-General to submit to it at its forty-fourth session a report containing the proposed date and a comprehensive outline of a possible programme for an international year of the family.
3. The survey reported on below was conducted to help fill the yawning gap in information regarding: (a) government perceptions of family issues, as reflected in legislation and policy statements affecting families; (b) government programmes with a family focus; and (c) the extent to which attention is given to the implications, for the family as a social unit, of policies and programmes to promote the well-being of individuals.
4. An earlier study, carried out in 1978, surveyed government policies for families in 14 countries in Europe and North America. 1/ Until now, there has been no survey of such policies that has included the developing countries. The present report is based on the replies of Governments in all parts of the world.

B. Approach, methodology and content

5. To assist with the design of the questionnaire for the survey, a steering committee composed of eight experts identified appropriate issues and recommended a methodology for the conduct of the survey. The expert meeting was held under the sponsorship of the Government of France and with the support of the French National Committee for the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Support for subsequent stages of the survey was received from the Government of Austria and UNICEF. The questionnaire, consisting of 16 questions, was sent to Governments in December 1987.
6. Governments were requested to provide information about their views, policies and programmes concerning families. Questions focused on four main areas: whether and how Governments defined the family in their constitutional

*For further information, see "Developments concerning national family policies" (E/1987/6) and "Impact of development on the institution of the family" (E/1985/9 and Corr.1).

and civil law; what they considered to be the principal issues, problems or concerns regarding families; which of the latter were covered by government policies and programmes; and which, while considered important, had not yet been covered.

7. Because of different cultural and historical traditions, the notion of family may vary from country to country. The intention of the survey was to avoid suggesting any particular definition, or areas where Governments should concentrate their attention. In order for the survey to reflect the views of Governments, questions were designed to be open-ended. No replies were proposed. All were initiated by Governments and did not depend on the wording of the questionnaire. As a result, the replies cover a wide range of issues, which makes their reporting more complicated. They also reflect the particular responsibilities, interests or frames of reference of the lead department or agency responding to the survey. Therefore, if some issues are not covered in this report, it is not necessarily an indication of their lack of importance.

8. Throughout the past year, the Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs of the United Nations Office at Vienna has received and tabulated responses to the survey. The present report is based on the replies of 48 Governments.* The regional breakdown of tabulated replies shows that 23, or 48 per cent, were received from countries from the region of the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE); 9, or 19 per cent, from countries served by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC); 2, or 4 per cent, from countries served by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA); 10, or 21 per cent, from countries served by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP); and 4, or 8 per cent, from countries served by the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA). In terms of economic groupings, 7, or 15 per cent, were received from countries with centrally planned economies; 25, or 52 per cent, from developing countries (2 of which are least developed countries); and 16, or 33 per cent, from countries with developed market economies.

9. Since the analysis of the 48 replies referred to above was completed, additional replies were received from 16 Governments.** A number of other Governments have indicated that they also intended to reply to the questionnaire. The findings set out in the present report should therefore be considered as preliminary. A fuller report, based on a larger sample, is being prepared and will be issued, in due course, as a United Nations technical publication.

*Australia, Austria, Belgium, Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, Canada, Central African Republic, Chile, China, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cyprus, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Ecuador, Egypt, Fiji, German Democratic Republic, Germany, Federal Republic of, Ghana, Greece, Guatemala, Indonesia, Iraq, Jamaica, Japan, Kuwait, Malta, Mexico, Morocco, New Zealand, Norway, Panama, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Romania, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Tuvalu, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America, Uruguay, Yugoslavia.

**Algeria, Burkina Faso, Burundi, France, Gabon, Holy See, Italy, Madagascar, Netherlands, Malawi, Rwanda, San Marino, Senegal, Sri Lanka, Syrian Arab Republic, Viet Nam.

I. LEGAL DEFINITIONS OF THE FAMILY

A. The legal foundation

10. Previous studies by the United Nations suggested that a useful indication of how Governments viewed families was to be found in legal instruments defining the family: a number of questions were therefore included in the survey to determine whether and how national laws defined the family.

11. Twenty-three, or just under one half of the responding Governments, pointed to an attempt to define the family or to identify specific family types, while 17 stated that no attempt had been made to do so; the remaining Governments either did not reply to the question or said that it did not apply. In the former group, respondents identified family types rather than defining the family; 17 of the 23 Governments indicated that only one type of family was recognized in law, while the others identified more than one type of family. The nuclear family was mentioned most frequently (17 times), followed by the extended family (5), the childless family (4), the single-parent family (3), and the single-person family (2).

B. Implications for social policy of legal definitions of the family

12. Many countries did not attempt to define the family in law; some recognized one type of family, others several different types. Even when they did not define the family, Governments, when describing policies designed to aid families, had particular types of family in mind.

13. The type of family most likely to receive attention from Governments, according to the replies, is the single-parent family. The main problems associated with the single-parent family were said to be their high incidence of poverty and dependence on the State and the heavy responsibilities falling on women who headed such families. For Governments, the main concern was the need to strengthen the legal position of single-parent families and meet their need for child-care facilities and other support services.

14. Other types of families received less attention. The extended family, about which much has been written deploring, lamenting or just noting its passing, was mentioned by only five countries in the context of their legal system. The nuclear family was not specifically mentioned in the context of government policy, perhaps because most respondents assumed it to be the typical family.

II. MAJOR ISSUES AND COMMON THEMES

15. Governments were also asked to answer questions covering three areas: (a) what they considered to be the principal family issues, problems and concerns; (b) the policies and programmes they had adopted to address them; and (c) the needs not yet addressed by Governments.

A. Attention to individual family members

16. The family issues, problems and concerns mentioned most frequently referred to individual family members: children (32 times), women (23), the aging (15), youth (20), the disabled (13), and men (3). This suggests that Governments may be more concerned with the circumstances of individuals than of the family as a unit.

1. Children

17. Children, as a special concern, were mentioned by 32 of the 48 Governments replying to the survey. Most often, concern for the conditions under which children were raised was reflected in policies affecting: single-parent families and their diminished resource base; the role of women as mothers and their traditional responsibility for the raising of children; the overall role of families as the primary providers of care to children; the impact of social services on children, paying particular attention to health care, education, welfare services and child care; and the legal status of children.

18. The following issues concerning children were reported to have been treated by Governments: elementary-school education; child welfare programmes; financial support to prevent family poverty and to encourage parental responsibility through child allowances, child support, tax deductions and exemptions; prevention of child abuse and exploitation; improved health-care services; parental leaves for purposes of child raising; protection for children without family care, abandoned or orphaned children; services provided to the children of migrants; and the provision of day care and child care.

19. Special recognition was given to the needs of children who had no effective supervision, including orphans, children without parents, and abandoned children.

2. Women and mothers

20. Many Governments indicated that women were still commonly considered the principal providers of care within the family, and that role was clearly reflected in the issues concerning women that were mentioned. The points most frequently referred to included: efforts to enable the family to care better for its members; a concern with providing financial support to families; a desire to promote equal roles for men and women within the family; a commitment to consider the problems of the aging; an awareness of the effects of divorce on family members; a concern for the problems of single parents; the need for day care and child care; concern about the effects of violence and abuse; the need for family and child allowances, family planning, vocational education and child support; concern for the problems of prostitutes; awareness of the prevalence of teen-age pregnancy; and the value of flexible working hours for parents.

21. Fifteen countries mentioned the importance of equal roles for women and men, while six others stressed the importance of women's equal rights with men. Less attention was paid, however, to interventions that might actually achieve more equality: just nine Governments mentioned child care, for example, and only one referred to vocational education designed for women. Other measures that might assist women, such as access to secondary and higher education, more flexible working hours and parental or paternal leave, were not mentioned.

22. While it was considered important to enable women to obtain remunerated employment outside the home, a corresponding view encouraging men to assume fuller responsibilities within the home was not stressed. In fact, the almost complete absence of any reference to fathers in a positive context would seem to indicate that Governments have not considered it their role to encourage fathers to play a fuller role within the household or in the context of child care.

23. Two countries indicated that prostitution was an issue and two others stated that the matter was being dealt with, but did not identify specific programmes.

3. Youth

24. Cited by 20 countries, youth is a subgroup that is clearly a cause of great concern to Governments. Problems were cited in the areas of: unemployment; substandard working conditions; juvenile dependency; education; vocational training; neglected and abused youth; runaway youth; school drop-outs; illegitimate births; drug and alcohol abuse; antisocial behaviour; and juvenile delinquency.

25. The policies and programmes that have been implemented are mainly concerned with youth unemployment, dependency, juvenile delinquency, teen-age pregnancies, the exploitation of youth in the work setting, and the regulating of working conditions for youth.

4. The aging

26. Concern was expressed by 15 Governments about the situation of the aging. They noted that their participation in the labour force was decreasing and emphasized the need to develop or extend services to the aging. Among the programmes described were efforts to improve the quality of care and supervision provided to the aging, to promote services that would enable families to care better for their elderly members, to encourage mutual assistance and care between the aging and younger generations, to improve old-age pensions and survivor benefits, and to reduce the isolation many aging people feel within the family and the community.

27. Specific programmes were mentioned by seven countries, in the following areas: pensions; social security; the provision of special care, nutrition and other health services.

5. The disabled

28. Thirteen countries referred to problems encountered by families that cared for disabled family members, especially disabled children. Mention was made, for example, of programmes providing for the rehabilitation of the disabled, promoting their development, assisting parents with support or self-help groups and providing benefits for the employed who became disabled.

6. Men and fathers

29. Men were mentioned in two contexts: violence by men against women; and equalizing the household burdens of men and women. Three countries cited specific national policies and programmes in connection with equal rights for men and women, equal economic and social partnership, and transformation of the mutual social and family roles of men and women.

30. Men as fathers were mentioned twice, both in the context of "absent fathers". No mention was made of any problems, concerns or issues that fathers might encounter. In essence, more attention was given to their absence than to their presence. It would seem, judging from these findings, that few benefits, services or allowances exist that would encourage fathers to play a more active role in household duties and child care.

B. Issues to which Governments have addressed themselves

31. This category comprised a variety of social services for families and their members. They included services related to: maternal and child health care; drug and alcohol abuse; nutrition; family planning; family counselling; child-support programmes; day care and child care, and pre-school facilities to help working parents and make it easier for them to better reconcile work and family responsibilities; assistance for single mothers, young and low-income families; improved access to government programmes; care for the newborn, children, youth, the aging and the disabled; improved child-raising; adoption services; services for abandoned children and orphans; and conciliation services for couples contemplating divorce.

32. The principal services and benefits cited by Governments covered a number of sectors. Chief among these was health, followed by education, housing and welfare. Social welfare was provided by Governments to meet the needs of the aging and children, especially.

33. Specific programmes were mentioned in the following areas: improvement of child-support services and child care; promotion of household services; expansion of family guidance centres; encouragement of new forms of care for the aging; extension of family aid services; increased care for the physically disabled; recognition of the need for making family benefits independent of civil status; expansion of provisions for parental leave; improvement of health protection and facilities for family rest and relaxation.

34. Ten countries indicated that they had dealt with all or most of the problems they had mentioned. Comments made included the following: "The government is trying to face almost all of the social problems"; "All the above mentioned issues have already been addressed by the Government"; "The country has dealt with the problems in its policy"; "The Government is engaged in providing solutions to all the problems mentioned"; "The Government is able to address every kind of problem"; "Programmes respond to all basic concerns and problems emerging at different stages in the life of families"; and "There are no issues or problems which could not be addressed".

1. Health

35. This category was mentioned by 29 Governments as being a concern for families. A number of health-related issues were mentioned, which were established as separate categories. These included: abuse of drugs and alcohol, which was cited by 12 countries; maternal and child health services, cited by eight countries; nutrition, mentioned by six countries; family planning, mentioned by five; and clean water, mentioned by one.

36. In addition to these issues, the need for medical insurance, the high incidence of infectious diseases, the situation of children with special needs, provisions to treat mental illness, and programmes to fight mistreatment of children were also covered. Governments stated that they had given attention in their programmes to maternal and child care, nutrition, family planning, vaccination, drug and alcohol abuse and clean water.

2. Labour market and work

37. This topic was raised by 22 countries, whose replies focused on such issues as: employment; problems of high unemployment, particularly among youth and unmarried mothers; underemployment among welfare recipients; unequal

job opportunities; barriers and disincentives to work, especially for women; low income-earning potential, especially for women and people in rural areas; substandard working environments; the need to reconcile employment and family life; and access to child care.

38. Reference was also made by 18 Governments to provisions to ensure improved access to the labour market, particularly for women. Governments stated their intention: to assist and protect the working mother (three); to enable the working mother to combine work and family responsibilities (three); to promote the integration of women into the work place (three); to regulate work conditions to avoid exploitation (two); and to improve benefits for working mothers (one). Reference was also made to the need to avoid exploiting other workers, especially youth, and to avoid dependency by providing employment and minimum income standards.

39. Reference was made to special leave provisions and other benefits that would enable parents to care for their children.

40. One Government noted that it had recognized the problem of child labour. Although many countries expressed concern about child welfare, paid attention to the problem of drop-outs and to the lack of educational opportunities for youth, and tried to prevent the exploitation of young people, little was proposed to discourage child labour.

3. Education

41. Eighteen Governments commented on education as a special concern. Five referred to the need for increased attention to the problem of drop-outs and training; two cited child care and illiteracy, and another lack of educational qualifications. Also mentioned as concerns were the need for educational reform, assistance to families for educational activities and training for women.

42. Nine Governments reported that they were dealing with the problem of lack of education, three of them specifying elementary and secondary schooling. One specifically mentioned the importance of education in family life.

43. Three countries cited school drop-outs as one of the problems encountered by families. This issue, which is directly related to the well-being of children, has traditionally been of concern because it often indicates that children are pressured to contribute their labour to family earnings, to the exclusion of their further education.

44. Four Governments referred to the need for vocational training, usually provided in the form of training in practical skills directly relevant to employment. Vocational training in the context of increased opportunities for women was mentioned by one country. While there were many references to the need for equal access for women to employment, only one country mentioned the need for increased educational opportunities for women.

Housing

45. Ten governments spoke generally about the need for housing; four mentioned problems of the homeless; three cited a housing shortage; two spoke of the need for healthy housing conditions; and housing for the weakest, for large families, for newlyweds, and for emancipated minors. One Government referred to the need for tax allowances to encourage home building. Five referred to programmes for resolving the problem of inadequate housing by encouraging more construction through the provision of low-interest loans and credits.

Family care within the family

46. A large number of services were categorized as "Family care for its members". They included services explicitly designed to help the family to provide better care for its own members. Examples included assistance and better social security provisions for single mothers and mothers who raised their children alone; recognition and payments to caregivers within the family; provisions for dependent youth; and support services to enable families to care for their aged, especially those who were sick.

47. The replies suggested that Governments saw the family as the most appropriate institution for providing care for those in need. Specific examples included shifting the responsibility for child support from the Government to the parent; assisting women so that they could take care of their children; helping families to care for disabled children or aging adults; supporting extended families; and placing children in foster families when they needed to be removed from their parents, or when they were neglected, abused or abandoned.

Financial support to families

48. This category, mentioned by 16 Governments, covered almost all types of direct financial assistance to families. It included family, child and child-raising allowances; cash benefits; unemployment and job-search allowances; income maintenance payments; old-age pensions and social security; systems of tax deductions, exemptions and credits; child-raising leave; household allowances; material assistance for families; maternity leave; sick child leave; and allowance for secondary school attendance.

III. ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR POLICY

49. Replies to the survey indicated that Governments were about as likely to define "family" as not but that they only rarely defined more than one type. Yet regardless of whether or not families are specifically defined, many of the policies adopted by Governments have an impact on families, either directly or indirectly. Therefore, Governments might wish to consider some of the following points.

50. Government programmes generally demonstrate far more interest in individual family members than in families as units. This may be a consequence of the unclear or ambiguous definition of family under which most Governments operate and/or a reflection of the diversity of families and households to be found even within countries. As a result, at the programme level, aid is often designated for specific target groups, such as children, youth, and the aging. When programmes are designed to provide services in such areas as health, employment, or housing, they often take insufficient account of the family circumstances of intended beneficiaries. As a result the family as a resource and source of support may be ignored if not eroded.

51. Therefore, if Governments design policies and programmes primarily or solely aimed at individual family members, there is the serious possibility that such programmes may not provide support to the family as a unit and may actually contribute to a weakening of the family as an institution. Governments may wish to consider this point and whether or not it is a desired outcome of policy.

52. At the same time, family policy is often framed with a particular family model in mind, which does not reflect the rich variety of family forms in each country.

53. Policies for families operate in conditions of uncertainty and change brought about by various factors. Such policies need to be considered within the context of larger social movements, such as modernization, urbanization, industrialization and migration.

54. Given the restraints on their resources, the ability of many Governments to ensure the continued provision of welfare and other social services to people in need has been questioned. In this connection, the role of the family has been emphasized, since it is the family unit that has traditionally taken care of people in need and is called upon when government services are curtailed. In fact, the ever-changing balance between services provided in the family and services provided by the State is a central issue in the discussion of policies for families.

55. In many cases families are supported in their attempts to meet their needs not by governmental intervention, but by private charities and other organizations whose aims are to provide services to people in need. In fact, in many countries the contribution of the community in providing back-up support to families is extensive, and local grass-roots organizations may often be more attuned to the needs of families than are governmental agencies. In this context, the important contributions of non-governmental organizations in many countries should be mentioned.

56. In many societies, particularly in developing countries, a great number of individuals need support, but families may also represent untapped resources for development. In terms of employment, education, health care and the provision of many other needs, the traditional linkages provided by extended family networks should not be underestimated; government policy could in fact support and strengthen such networks, so that alternatives to expensive, heavily-structured social services might be developed.

57. That so few Governments referred to unmet needs in their replies raises a number of questions concerning what Governments feel they should provide. It may also reflect lowered expectations, given the limited and contracting resource base available for Government activities even as the demand for services increases. When expectations that the Government can provide services are lower, it is likely that demands placed on family resources will be higher.

58. Many government policies affect families as a viable unit, even when the effects are not direct or immediately apparent. Therefore, Governments might give more specific attention to such effects. In this regard, the contribution of one Government described an approach to policy-making using family criteria:

"In formulating and implementing policies and regulations that may have significant impact on family formation, maintenance, and general well-being, departments and agencies shall, to the extent permitted by law, assess such measures in the light of the following questions:

"(a) Does this action by government strengthen or erode the stability of the family?

"(b) Does this action strengthen or erode the authority and rights of parents in the education, nurturing, and supervision of their children?

"(c) Does this action help the family perform its functions, or does it substitute governmental activity for the function?

"(d) Does this action by government increase or decrease family earnings? Do the proposed benefits of this action justify the impact on the family budget?

"(e) Can this activity be carried out by a lower level of Government or by the family itself?

"(f) What message, intended or otherwise, does this program send to the public concerning the status of the family?

"(g) What message does it send to young people concerning the relationship between their behavior, their personal responsibility, and the norms of the society?"

59. This response was the first indication by any country of a systematic approach, not to developing a national family policy but to ensuring, during the policy-making process, a heightened awareness of the myriad ways in which families may be affected by legislation in fields that may appear to have nothing to do with familial well-being.

IV. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

60. In conclusion, it is appropriate to make a few observations on the survey of national family policies and on how best to ensure that family issues receive continued attention.

61. The survey provides a new source of national family policies information, and is particularly useful because it includes replies from countries in all regions of the world. It is, however, only one step along the path of increasing awareness of family issues by Governments. It is hoped that Governments will be encouraged, by the information made accessible through the survey, to continue developing and refining their own thinking about families and about policies to meet their needs.

62. The information contained in this report, it should be acknowledged, is limited in scope. Only about a third of the membership of the United Nations replied and the answers were often provided by one governmental ministry or agency that dealt with only some aspects of family policy. The result is that a fuller understanding of concerns about the family is still beyond reach. Nevertheless, Governments are invited to consider the information provided here, and use it, as appropriate, in the further elaboration of family policies. In this endeavour, it might be particularly useful to encourage better co-ordination among national ministries and agencies dealing with family or family-related issues and other government departments.

63. As part of the effort to increase awareness of the role of families and to ensure continued and appropriate attention to their problems and concerns, an international year of families has been proposed. The Secretary-General has been requested to put forward a comprehensive programme of activities for such a year. The Commission for Social Development may wish to make observations and suggestions with a view to assisting the Secretary-General in drawing up his proposals.

64. Similarly, the Commission might consider it useful to encourage increased attention to family issues in the preparation of an international development strategy for the 1990s, which is to be designated the Fourth United Nations Development Decade.

Note

1/ Sheila B. Kamerman and Alfred J. Kahn, eds., Family Policy: Government and Families in Fourteen Countries (New York, Columbia University Press, 1978).

